

Reflection Of Community

Cemetery Art Reflects History

By Nancy Burns

Cemeteries are more than a place to bury the dead. In New England they are an expression of history, a glimpse into the attitude and character of the community, and an example of the varied art form of local citizenry.

Cohasset offers fine examples of the varied carving styles prevalent during the 18th century at Central Cemetery on Joy Place and Beechwood Cemetery on Beechwood Road.

Both cemeteries offer examples of skeletons, winged souls, idealized cherubim and many are decorated with symbols of mortality, symbols of fertility, vegetables, hearts, flowers, vines, sunbursts, sunflowers, skull and cross bones, and hourglasses.

The artistry of the carver varies from stone to stone. Many of the early stones are barely etched into the slate, done in rudimentary strokes with portraiture consisting of little more than an oval with eyes, nose and mouth.

Others have a richness of graphidesign and are superbly executed by a master craftsman in three dimensional form. The more expert the craftsman the more intricate and deeply etched the carved design.

Best examples of New England carving styles occur in the 18th and 17th centuries. Around 1800 the carving styles changed dramatically and the stereotyped urn-and-willow design is suddenly found all over New England. Historians thought for some time that many of the stones were imported from England but Harriette Forbes, in her book, "Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800" discounts that theory.

A few of the stones may have come to the colonies as ballast in the early days but it wasn't long before rich supplies of natural materials were found. The Isle of Slate in Boston Harbor was mentioned in public records in 1650 as being free for any man to make use of slate.

Quarries at Squantam existed as early as 1724 and also in Cambridge. In Plymouth County green schist was used as well as red and brown sandstones from Connecticut.

Many of the men credited by Forbes for particular carving styles held other occupations such as slaters, masons, cordwainers who not only made and repaired shoes but did more ornamental kinds of leather work, woodcarving and other related crafts.

To the Puritan, death was an every day occurrence. The stones were intended to honor the dead and serve as a reminder to the living. Since many could not read even English, let alone many of the Latin inscriptions, the carving and its symbolism provided a visual message for all.

Another source of joy to the

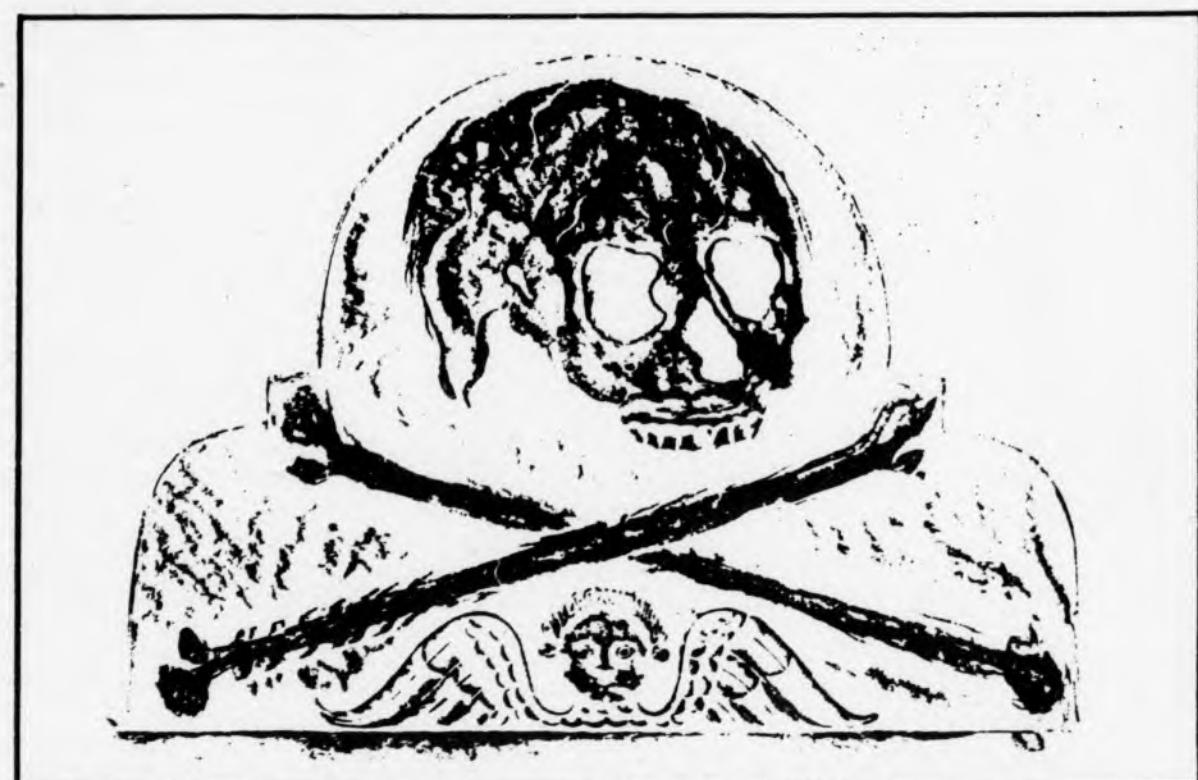
avid gravestone seeker is the epitaph inscribed on the tombstone. On old tombstones can be found keys to the local or national history; bitter commentaries on life; speculations and affirmations of immortality; stories of ancient loves and shattered dreams; in short a hint of the joys and frustrations of mankind.

Inscriptions were taken not only from the Bible but also from books of devotional verse and many an aspiring poet or clergyman contributed to the epitaph.

Only a century or two ago ready-made verses could be selected from books available just as a greeting card is available. Use of book verses explains why many stones have the same epitaph.

It is apparent from the gravestones and engravings

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